

Promising Practice: Certification Exams Gateway Community and Technical College Health Profession Opportunity Project

Most participants in Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) programs funded by the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Family Assistance will need to take a national or state certification exam to be eligible to work in their selected occupations. Because of this, helping students pass these exams is one of the most important services an HPOG program can provide. At Gateway Community and Technical College in Kentucky, the HPOG program has recognized this and helps students schedule, prepare for, and pay for their certification exams.

Even if a certification is not legally required to work in an occupation, nationally- or state-recognized credentials greatly improve the employability of job seekers. Because of this, Gateway's HPOG program requires all students to take a certification exam at the end of their training. Relevant training programs include those for Nurse Assistants, Medical Coders, Pharmacy Technicians, Emergency Medical Technicians, Paramedics, Medical Assistants, Phlebotomists, and Massage Therapists.

The HPOG program begins preparing students for their tests from the first day of class. However, this was not always the case. Prior to the implementation of the HPOG grant, Gateway did not require Allied Health students to sit for certification exams. When HPOG project director Terri Green successfully made the case that certification improves employability, she observed a "culture change" within the Allied Health division, and soon faculty began to include test-related material in their lesson plans. Now some of the training programs even require students to take the certification exam as part of their grade.

Despite this increased classroom emphasis on certification, Ms. Green felt that the HPOG program could do more for its clients. To this end, the program pays exam-related fees and works with students to schedule their test dates. Recognizing that some certifying bodies require payment to come from the test taker alone, the HPOG program also reimburses students who are required to pay out of pocket for their exams. Since there may be a lengthy amount of time between finishing training and sitting for a certification exam (depending on the occupation), the HPOG program was also faced with keeping the student engaged and prepared even after he or she had finished training. By holding regularly scheduled skills workshops and group review sessions, the HPOG team addresses this gap and keeps students ready for their exams. In some cases, the HPOG program has also paid for review books and practice tests. All of this contact with the students provides an additional benefit to the program: the HPOG staff is kept aware of students' certification status and can direct them toward employment once they are certified.

To other HPOG programs looking to assist students in taking and passing certification exams, Ms. Green recommends keeping the students engaged while they wait for their tests. This helps

maintain their motivation. Ms. Green also encourages programs to offer practice testing in environments that closely resemble those in which the students will take their actual exams. Because many HPOG participants are nontraditional students who may not be accustomed to test taking, these practice sessions help them feel more comfortable and confident. Lastly, Ms. Green recommends HPOG programs consider any barriers students may face in getting to the testing location. In some cases, chartering a van to transport a group of students can lessen the stress on the students and prevent them from missing their test date.

Promising Practice: Using Facebook Gateway Community and Technical College

Gateway Community and Technical College's HPOG program has recognized the potential power of social media and created an HPOG Facebook group. Open only to program participants and staff, this Facebook group facilitates the two-way communication that is necessary for HPOG to successfully meet the needs of its target population. For instance, staff can share information about upcoming events, alert students to scheduling changes, point students towards employers that are hiring, keep in touch with program graduates, and answer questions. Students can ask for assistance, share the news of a successful test session or internship, celebrate a life event, and give and receive peer encouragement. The accessibility of Facebook (it can be accessed from stationary computers as well as cell phones and mobile devices) allows students to get the assistance or information they need without having to be on campus.

Gateway's HPOG project director, Terri Green, explained that the Facebook group was set up a few months after the program launched, with a staff member from the college's public relations team assisting in the design of the page. Program staff inform students about the group during HPOG orientation workshops, encouraging them to sign up for an invitation to join. This invitation comes from program staff, thereby ensuring that only HPOG students have access to the page. However, Ms. Green noted that the privacy concerns inherent in social media apply to the HPOG Facebook group, leading her to recommend the creation of "professional" Facebook accounts for staff interacting with the HPOG page. Rather than containing a staff member's full name and personal information, a "professional" account usually contains only the staff member's first name followed by HPOG, e.g., "Jennifer HPOG." The program's case managers and career specialists all have accounts, as does Ms. Green.

By leveraging the power of social media, Ms. Green and her team have helped strengthen the sense of community for Gateway's HPOG participants and increased the accessibility of the supports needed for their success.